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SUBJECT: FIANNA FAIL STARTS PROCESS TO CHOOSE NEW IRISH PRIME  
MINISTER; CABINET SHUFFLE LIKELY

REF: DUBLIN 166

¶1. (U) Following Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern's April 2 resignation announcement effective May 6 (reftel), attention will now focus on the selection of his successor as party leader by Fianna Fail. Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Finance Brian Cowen appears to be the overwhelming favorite to succeed Ahern.

¶2. (SBU) Cowen, Ahern's preferred choice, is likely to be selected as party leader unopposed as early as next week. Several senior Ministers, including Justice Minister Brian Lenihan, Enterprise, Trade and Employment Minister Micheal Martin, Social Affairs Minister Martin Cullen, and Defence Minister Willie O'Dea have all indicated their support for Cowen. Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern, a potential challenger, ruled himself out of the running late on April

¶3. Transport Minister Noel Dempsey, another possible challenger, has not yet ruled himself out, but is expected to do so, in part because he won't want to risk his own political credibility by challenging the heir apparent at such a sensitive time.

¶3. (U) Fianna Fail's parliamentary party executive - consisting of the chairman, leader, deputy leader, whip, and assistant whip - meet on April 3 to agree on a deadline for nominations and the date for an election if there is more than one candidate for party leader. If there is a contest, the 77 Fianna Fail Members of Parliament (TDs) will vote by secret ballot. Fianna Fail Senators and Members of the European Parliament will not have a vote. Neither will Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) John O'Donoghue.

¶4. (U) Ahern will formally tender his resignation to President Mary McAleese on May 6. Under the Irish constitution, this will serve as a collective resignation of the entire Irish government. All ministers, including the Taoiseach, however, will remain in office until replaced. Ahern and his caretaker government will attend the next available sitting of the Dail (Irish Parliament) on May 7, where his pre-elected successor as party leader will be elected Taoiseach (assuming that there is no change in the current governing coalition). The new Taoiseach will then travel to Irish President Mary McAleese's office at Aras an Uachtarain and receive his seal of office. He will return to the Dail to announce his new cabinet, and the entire group will formally receive their seals of office from the President after being approved by the Dail.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: While the choice of party leader and Taoiseach seems more or less preordained, the same cannot be said of the contest for deputy leader of Fianna Fail, who will become Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister). Justice Minister Brian Lenihan, Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern, Enterprise Minister Micheal Martin, and Education Minister Mary Hanafin are all in the running. In the end, the most significant aspect of the coming changes in the Irish government may well be the result of the inevitable Cabinet reshuffle.

FOLEY